

Advice on EML from PAO

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Well, it's that time once again; time for each of the mighty units and staff sections in the Fires Brigade to update you on what's been happening and the Public Affairs Office is no exception.

Of course you will be happy to know that we are just over half way through our deployment here, and you can be very proud of each and every Fires Brigade Soldier as continue to support the mission of helping Iraq become a free and stable country.

Last month, I had the wonderful privilege of going on environment morale leave which gave me the opportunity to not only recharge my batteries, but to get close once again to my wife and children back in San Antonio.

Before I go on, hats off to Spc. Allison Churchill! She did an excellent job in keeping the Public Affairs Office on the straight and narrow while I was away. She is definitely someone I can depend on to handle business if I'm not present.

Now, I would like to offer you some thoughts on EML: Thoughts I've gathered through my recent, wonderful, and awesome break. Many of you who have seen your loved ones on EML already may have noticed these things already, but for those of you who are due to see your Soldier come home for a break, I only hope these thoughts help in some way.

Don't be surprised that at the beginning if your loved one doesn't want to go out for a grand celebration the first night back. Like me, they may be too excited and nervous to rest on the journey back from Iraq to the U.S. My trip, from Baghdad to Dallas, lasted about 60 hours.

I laugh now at memories of myself falling asleep in my fancy plate of lasagna at around 8 p.m. at a quaint Italian restaurant that my kids were so eager to show me.

I also remember the blurred words..."Mom, Dad is falling asleep already, is he okay?" Yup – shouldn't let your loved one drive for at least the first 24 hours on the ground too – NEVER drive while tired from jet lag.

On the subject of jet lag: Expect it to last for at least two to three days. It won't be unusual for your loved one to succumb to the attack of the Z-Monster at odd times of the day, or to seem somewhat non-talkative or anti-social in the early evening hours. Believe me when I say this: "It's not you."

My advice on the time you have with your loved one: KISS it (and definitely them). In the broadcast world, we use the KISS acronym for Keep It Simple Stupid, but for now, I'll just say keep it simple.

Do not feel like you have to plan and carry out a whole plethora of activities during their two weeks of freedom. And never feel guilty for not getting to everything you had in mind at the beginning. Sea World, Schlitterbahn, and Six Flags will definitely still be around when your loved one re-deploys.

Yes, I had nagging thoughts on the flight back to Iraq - "Did I really do enough while I was home? Did I spend enough time with the kids, with my wife?" This is

natural. If you sense that your loved one is feeling this way, reassure them that everything is okay, and that the main thing that matters is that you were able to spend quality time together.

If your Soldier seems a bit morose a day or two before returning, this is natural too. Again, gentle reassurance works wonders on an aching sole.

The time flies by at the speed of light! I remember plodding through week one at a quick but manageable pace and thinking, "Man, what am I worried about! I have another week left – a weekend, and Memorial Day too." Next thing I realize, I'm sitting right back at the terminal at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

Also, do not be surprised that if in the first few phone calls or e-mails back to you upon their return to Iraq they sound like the whole world is crashing in around them.

I remember trying to fight the post leave blues on the flight back to Kuwait from DFW, and telling myself that I would have them licked by then.

But on the following day while enduring temperatures greater than 110 F, numerous roll calls for the final flight back, and forcing myself to eat, I was feeling pretty darn blue. And I sounded like the donkey Eeyor from the Winnie the Pooh cartoons when I called my wife from Kuwait.

And the feeling hung on for a couple days afterward. However, I was reassured by others that have gone before me, that this was completely a natural reaction, and that I was not alone; that like all things, this will pass.

I will wrap it up with this review: Enjoy the time you have with your loved one. It goes by quick! Keep it simple, and expect some sadness, and maybe a bit of disappointment at the end of EML. Again, this is all natural. Before you know it, your loved one will be back in your arms before too much longer.